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Amherst Student Newspaper Article: "Teacher Frankly Outlines Deficiencies of Student for Benefit of Proud Parent"

Amherst Student

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Teacher Frankly Outlines Def of Student for Benefit

We quote in part the following extract from the *New York Times* of March 11. The italics are our own.

By a College Instructor.

"You gave my boy Arthur an F in English composition and I wonder what is the matter? He says he has been studying very hard, and he is a truthful boy. If he does not learn to write correctly he will never succeed, and I am worried about it. Please tell me what you think is wrong with Arthur and what I should do?"

Every college instructor has received such letters, and has answered them with vague politeness, expressing his fervent interest in Arthur's progress, and his belief that what the boy needs is "closer concentration," or "further drill in the mechanics of expression."

The other night I found myself addressing to an imaginary father an imaginary letter which told, for once, the complete and unvarnished truth. The letter would not, of course, serve for all cases; but it might almost be kept as an office form to be sent a certain type of father about a certain type of boy. Here it is:

"I 'flunked' your son Arthur in English because his work was illiterate and because he never attempted to improve it. Even if by the end of the term he had become able to write with reasonable correctness, I could not have given him a passing mark, for he would never have been able to use English as a medium for the expression of ideas. This must seem to you a harsh judgment, and you will wish me to explain it.

"Arthur, like everybody else, is the product of heredity and of environment. As to his heredity I can only guess, being ignorant of what lies back of him. He seems to have inherited a sound and healthy body, together with a good stock of characteristic American virtues. But something is wrong with his brain. I would not call the lad a defective. He responds to crude stimuli, and can perceive certain obvious similarities between things. He lacks, however, that power to make distinctions which is the basis of logic. To define a term and to keep a central point of view in classifying a body of material are for him impossible feats. He cannot stick to a subject, arrange his thoughts in coherent order or apprehend relations of cause and effect. The boy is therefore inhibited from creative study—the only kind of study worth while.

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“These faults may, of course be partly due to bad education; but no education, however bad, can entirely deprive a human mind of all constructive power. With Arthur thinking is so evidently a painful and unnatural process that I must regard his hereditary mental equipment as deficient. You will say that it is the business of the instructor to cure these defects. *But education is merely guidance in self-realization.* Its fruits are Dead Sea apples when the self is not worth realizing. *Education cannot turn a poor mind into a good one any more than it can turn a good mind into a poor one.*

“But has environment no power to influence heredity? The right environment could not have given Arthur a different basic equipment, but it might have enabled him to make better use of what he had. Ask yourself, then, to what environmental influences your son has been exposed, remembering that the most powerful of these influences are to be found not in school or college, but in the home.

HOW WAS ARTHUR RAISED ?

“Has Arthur ever heard you express a broadly rational conception, ever joined with you in any fine sport of the mind? Have you brought him up on noble legends, read Shakespeare to him before bedtime? When he awoke, did his eyes rest on beautiful pictures? Did you ever take him to an orchestral concert, or to a really good play? Your son's face and actions and speech have already answered these questions for me. You have stuffed his mind with dull platitudes, have done everything you could to convince him of the impiety of original thought. You have crammed his soul with ugly chromos, jazz, movies, yellow newspapers and sensational magazines. You have addressed your son every day, for eighteen years, in ungrammatical, ill-chosen and fumbling words. Yet you do not blush to toss him to me with a ‘Here! Make a scholar of him!’”

At the large high school to which you sent him he met hundreds of replicas of himself, association with whom fixed, intensified and made more blatant his dullness and vulgarity. In many cases his teachers were more expert than his present college instructors, but they were underpaid, overworked and unintelligently supervised. The system forced them to give not a liberalizing education, but a narrow training designed to prepare some students to meet specific vocational situations and others to answer specific college examination questions. Arthur never discovered in high school that the mind is more than a passive factor in the learning process. Instead he received the impression that text-books contain the answer to every

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March 19, 1923

Outlines Deficiencies for Benefit of Proud Parent

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question, and that the student need only memorize these answers in order to have a grasp of a given subject.

OUT OF HIS ELEMENT.

"Arthur is unable to account for his presence in college. He is perplexed when I question him on the subject, because going to college seems the obviously conventional procedure. The burden of proof, he feels, is on me. Why should he not go to college? He speaks of the practical importance of an education, and with his next breath proclaims the uselessness of all that he is studying. The explanation on which he falls back is the value of a vague abstraction called 'college life'. No doubt you have assured him that 'college life' is a great thing. I wonder how great it really is.

"One of the obscure fraternities welcomed Arthur to its bosom rather than have a disgracefully small Freshman delegation. Your boy's friends will be chosen almost exclusively from the members of this order. Such companionships, held together in college by external and artificial ties, are either dissolved after graduation or kept up only by the most determined sentimentality. Do not overestimate the practical advantages of these associations. The fraternity has a few prominent graduates, but they are generally faithless to their mystic vows in direct proportion to their success in life. Though Arthur will of course make some genuine friendships, I question whether they will be more beautiful or lasting than those he would have made elsewhere.

"Nor should you hope for very much from the extra-curricular activities into which Arthur's fraternity has driven him. He has not become a 'big man on the campus'. Such pre-eminence requires a rather large amount of misapplied personal force. His brains and his muscles do not co-ordinate well enough to make him an athlete, and he lacks the wit to rise high in college politics. He is a member of the Committee on Designing the Class Pipe, and owes his failure in scholarship partly to cavorting in the chorus of the 'Varsity Show'. Of course, he cheers loudly at all the games. You pride yourself on being a practical man. Let me ask what practical benefit you expect Arthur to derive from four years of such elaborate childishness?

"Or do you believe that your son will graduate with a stronger, more manly character? My own observation has been that *college makes the strong boy stronger and the weak boy weaker*. Arthur is a *weak* boy. I do not mean that your son will be seriously corrupted; he is perhaps not sufficiently avid of experience for that. He will, however, develop a habit of sniggering and learing at sacred and beautiful things, a habit to which a little genuine sin would be preferable. Already he makes a parade of vices which he does not possess. Two glasses of beer would make him silly, but he will loudly

and learning at sacred and beautiful things, a habit to which a little genuine sin would be preferable. Already he makes a parade of vices which he does not possess. Two glasses of beer would make him silly, but he will loudly whisper of wild liquor-parties. With girls he is clumsy and silent, but to hear him brag at the fraternity house you would think him a master of amour. He swears, of course, and tells bad stories, though merely out of deference to the code of the 'regular feller'. Your boy will probably not be ruined by college, but he will not be greatly ennobled by his experience.

POOR SORT ALL AROUND.

"And so into Arthur's world of 'college life' I burst with the stern claims of scholarship. To him it is a game, a rather dull game. He tries to conceal the fact that he is not studying, and I try to catch him. If I gave him a passing grade, he would boast to his fellows of his talent for bluffing. Since I won this curious contest, however, he thinks me a cold-hearted tyrant. He wants me to raise his mark, arguing that his work for the varsity show entitles him to a special dispensation. Has he not been serving Alma Mater? If only you had taught him to abide by the consequences of his decisions!

"I conclude that you have cast Arthur for a role which he cannot play because you are the victim of certain widely prevalent delusions. *You believe that every American boy should go to college, whereas only a few American boys should go to college.* You believe that education can remove fundamental defects of heredity and the results of adverse home environment, whereas it stands powerless in the face of such obstacles. You believe that liberal studies are intended to increase earning power, whereas they are intended to illuminate the mind and spirit. You believe that 'college life' has great educative value, whereas most of the activities included in this term are forms of play under pompous and wasteful disguises.

"If you have followed me thus far you should be in no doubt as to what to do with Arthur. Remove your son from college and set him to work at something within his powers. College education is an initiation into the life of reason, and this life Arthur will never lead. *In certain forms of business, however, he would be successful; would become a prosperous, happy, useful and respected citizen.* There is nothing undemocratic in reserving opportunities for those who are qualified to take advantage of them. When you and men like you realize the foolish wastefulness and cruelty of forcing advanced studies upon the Arthurs of the nation, the American college will be able to turn unhampered to its proper task of developing the talents of the talented."